

# MIGRATION ACTION

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# Bureaucrating the Bureaucrats: Ethnic Groups and Public Access



*by David Griffiths*

## Premiss One

Population statistics provide us with the basis of determining which population sub-groups should control and have access to radio. Control and access should be directly in proportion to the percentage of each sub-group in the population. If we take ethnic groups as a sub-group and decide that 25% of the population is of ethnic origin then they should control and have access to 25% of radio.

## Premiss Two

Ideally, of course any community group or individual that wishes to apply for licenses or access should be obliged. But as there is not an unlimited amount of frequencies there will be a need to decide on priorities. Affluent middle-class groups and individuals should not be allowed to pre-empt radio. It is important that these groups and individuals are not allowed to monopolize radio to the exclusion of low-income and ethnic groups, black and women's groups. Middle class, White Anglo Saxon Protestant, Male values already prevail on radio.

## PUBLIC ACCESS

A public access station owned, operated and controlled by the ABC will go to air early this year.

All groups and individuals wishing to have access to the station will have access. The ABC is inviting people to put forward firm proposals for programmes.

A meeting of ABC Commissioners on 12/13 December, 1974 decided the following policy for the station :

- (a) Since some time had elapsed since the "access" station was first raised (October, 1974) it was felt desirable to get the station on the air early in the new year — February has been suggested.
- (b) Groups and individuals are invited to put forward firm proposals for use of the station.
- (c) The ABC could not abrogate its basic

## Premiss Three

Broadcasters should take the initiative in deliberately undermining their own positions and accept that they are skilled workers who should be placing their skills at the service of the man, woman and child in the street to enable them to say what they want to say in their own way. People interviewed for radio, for example should be given the opportunity to hear the tape after it is recorded and as of right edit or change anything they don't like, are ashamed of or wish to modify.

responsibility for the station, however, it would like a committee of community representatives to advise and liaise with the ABC on all aspects of the station.

- (d) Balance would not apply, although groups



and individuals would have a right of reply. This would depend on groups and individuals requesting it. All groups wishing to have access would have access.

- (e) The ABC would provide the staff, facilities and funds for the station.
- (f) Guidelines would be developed for those who wished to participate. These would be developed in conjunction with an advisory committee

There has, in fact, been a committee of community representatives working with the ABC, but as the Committee has found to its chagrin the committee's status is advisory and its advice it often ignored.

Like, for example, the advice of the committee that the station should go to air on April 2, 1975. The ABC decided otherwise.

Like, for example, the advice of the committee that the ABC should finance a booklet on access. The ABC decided otherwise.

Like, for example, the advice of the committee that the ABC should finance a conference on access. The ABC decided otherwise.

Like, for example, the advice of the committee that the station should be controlled by an independent committee of users. The ABC decided otherwise.

Co-convenors of the committee are George Zangalis, of the Migrant Workers Conference Committee, and Ray Cher, of the Italian Committee of Co-ordination.

## HISTORY

The ABC's access station in Melbourne is part of the initial stages for introduction of a public broadcasting service for Australia. On September 23, 1974 the Australian Cabinet announced the initial features :

Adelaide University Radio Station to get a full AM licence (previously it was restricted e.g. no music).

The Music Broadcasting Societies in Victoria and N.S.W. to be invited to establish fine music FM stations.

The ABC to be invited to plan a regional

network of 14 FM and 14 AM stations.

The ABC also to be given two additional AM stations, one in Melbourne and one in Sydney (using standby transmitters).

Although the Department of the Media has foreshadowed the establishment of ethnic stations, it has not said when such stations might commence operation. The suspicion is that the Department, aided and abetted by the Australian Broadcasting Control Board, would like to divert the demand for ethnic stations by channelling ethnic groups into using the ABC access station.

Anyhow, the access station is the reality we have to contend with and despite the fact that there has been inadequate public discussion, despite the fact that the ABC has blackmailed and intimidated the Advisory Committee, and despite the fact that most people do not understand the issues and the alternatives — the station does represent a substantial improvement on what is at present offered by commercial and national networks.

## BUREAUCRATS

What the ABC fears most of all is shared knowledge by community groups. Once knowledge is shared participants will be able to compare and evaluate resources, suggestions and difficulties.

One thing is certain and that is that the bureaucrats of the ABC enjoy a characteristic common to all bureaucrats — a calculated policy of withholding information from "outsiders". The only effective counter to this strategy is to make specific demands based on specific knowledge.

If enough groups make enough demands and the same demands, then in the course of time they will invariably affect the situation. United, community groups could muster sufficient numbers to necessitate a response — albeit, an unsatisfactory one.

## ISSUES

The commitment that the access station would go to air has been made without adequate consideration given to the problems of access: What



is access? What will be the criteria for access? Who will enforce this criteria? Who will have a right of reply? Who will not have a right of reply?

Access, however, is not simply a matter of establishing an access station. The ABC has said that studios, technical equipment and staff would be provided, but it has not indicated what additional funding, if any, will be available. Funds are required to meet all costs incurred by groups and individuals in preparing and producing their own programmes. The absence of adequate funding would create differing levels of access — depending on the ability of particular groups to meet accommodation and travel costs, reimburse participants and pay writers, musicians and researchers.

Funds are also necessary to promote the station. Promotion is necessary to encourage users and attract listeners. If people are not aware of the possibilities for access and the availability of the station then they can hardly be expected to use what they don't know about.



Many people lack confidence in their ability to use radio and lack an understanding of how it could be used differently. This is a condition of powerlessness which has been reinforced by the existing national and commercial radio services which have discouraged and opposed wider public participation.

Access programming should not only consist of one-shot affairs. It is necessary for groups to be

given the opportunity to build up an audience and this is only possible by allowing them a particular time period each week or perhaps several time periods each week. This is also necessary to allow groups to build up confidence and develop an expertise. Access stations could be training grounds for groups who subsequently want to control their own stations.

These are but a few thoughts on the meaning of access. Above all, the access station is a political fact and act — the structure and policies of the station will be politically defined and enforced.

## ACTION

Support the few progressive members on the advisory committee. Attend public meetings and express your opinion at the meetings. In consultation with the advisory committee, start negotiating, however, I suggest you roughly work out your ideas and needs.

What is the purpose of your proposed programme? How can this goal be effected? How would the community be involved in the programme? What would be the format of the programme? Interviews? Panels? Documentaries? News? In studio presentation? Out-studio presentation? Comment on issues? Phone ins? How will you organize programmes? What will be the organizational set up? What facilities and equipment will you need? Studio? Portable unit? Mobile unit?

More specifically, I suggest you work out the proposed number of programmes (e.g. 6), the proposed length of programmes (e.g. 1 hour), the proposed time to be broadcast (10.00am — 11.00am), funds required, staff support required and an outline of programmes.

In conclusion, the ABC's access station is not evidence of "a social innovation which springs directly from the Labor Party policy of re-emphasising community needs in national planning," but rather a calculated political move by the ABC, the Australian Broadcasting Control Board and the Department of the Media to control and minimise the democratisation of radio.

\* Department of the Media, Working Paper in Broadcasting (November 8, 1974), p. 2